



Digital Commons @ Assumption University

Political Science Department Faculty Works

Political Science Department

2013

The Incomplete Whole: The Structural Integrity of Thucydides' History

Bernard J. Dobski

Assumption College, bdobski@assumption.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.assumption.edu/political-science-faculty>



Part of the [Philosophy Commons](#), and the [Political Science Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Dobski, Bernard J. "The Incomplete Whole: The Structural Integrity of Thucydides' History." *Socrates and Dionysus: Philosophy and Art in Dialogue*. Edited by Ann Ward. Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2013. Pages 14-32.

This Book Chapter is brought to you for free and open access by the Political Science Department at Digital Commons @ Assumption University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Political Science Department Faculty Works by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ Assumption University. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@assumption.edu.

CHAPTER TWO

THE INCOMPLETE WHOLE: THE STRUCTURAL INTEGRITY OF THUCYDIDES' HISTORY

BERNARD J. DOBSKI

The History of Thucydides concludes in the middle of a sentence about the 21st year of a war that spanned 27 years. We can resist the temptation to conclude that Thucydides' work is unfinished not only because our author informs us that he lived several years after the war ended (V.26, II.65.12, I.1)*, but because the structural outline of his work shows why its abrupt and apparently incomplete conclusion is necessary. Careful attention to the broader architecture of Thucydides' work reveals a dialectical movement from the tensions within political justice as the Greeks understood it to a presentation of nature as a standard for morality and politics. But in Thucydides' hands, nature as a standard by which one can judge politics and moral virtue must ultimately be exchanged in favour of a return to the standard of Greek—and especially Athenian—politics albeit a return mediated by the foregoing reflections on the limits to political life and human nature. The necessity of this return to the conventions of Athenian politics is thus at once occasioned *and* conditioned by an awareness and acceptance of the fundamental limits (intelligible and otherwise) to the moral and political categories that define human life, an awareness reflected in the puzzling conclusion of the History.

An ending that seems so problematic to so many scholars and readers of this epic appears less so when one refuses to impose on Thucydides a view of what his work is or should be. For those who insist on calling his work a "history" would do well to observe that his work has no official title, that the Greek word for history *never once* shows up in the work, and that the classical definition of history from which our modern conception

* Thucydides' work has no official title. I follow convention by referring to it as the History. All references to Thucydides' History are in standard book, chapter, and, where relevant, sentence, form. Translations are mine and based on the Jones and Powell Oxford Classical Text.

derives appears first in Aristotle's *Poetics*, which is to say some two generations after Thucydides wrote. We must therefore relax our expectations that his work should cover the full 27 year war and all that happened in it. If we instead approach the History more naively, allowing ourselves to wonder why Thucydides includes and omits what he does – that is, if we are attentive to the *artistry* of the History, then we can enter into that dialogue to which his History constantly beckons us. Attention to the artistic elements at work in the History is hardly ground-breaking. This path to the political wisdom of the History has already been charted by its best readers (Hobbes 1989, 577; Rousseau 1979, 239; Nietzsche 1977, 559-59). By following in their footsteps, I merely hope to foreground elements of the work's artistic polish that all too often remain under-theorized by contemporary scholarship on Thucydides.

The End and Beginning of the History

In the last sentence of the book, Thucydides reports that the Persian satrap Tissaphernes “went to Ephesus and offered sacrifice to Artemis” (VIII.109). This final sentence, whose concluding word is “Artemis,” recalls the first words of the History which are “Thucydides an Athenian.” If we take seriously Thucydides’ artistry in composing the History in the way that he does, then we are entitled to wonder what he intends his readers to think by opening his work with his own name, the name of an Athenian male, and by concluding it with the name of a goddess, the twin sister of Apollo, whose temple is in Persia and who represents the power of generation (see Munn, 2000). Scholars of the History have long noted the presence of dyads within the History, some more obvious than others: peace-war, motion-rest, Greekness-barbarianism, Athens-Sparta, justice-necessity (see chiefly Strauss 1963). But if we take seriously this pairing of Thucydides and Artemis, a pairing that would substitute our author for the embodiment of divine reason, then we might add to the list the following dyads: human-divine, male-female, and reason-generation. Since they open and close the History, Thucydides invites us to wonder what these dualities mean for everything that comes between them. The immediate contexts of both the beginning and conclusion of the History shed light on this question.

Tissaphernes goes to Ephesus to sacrifice to Artemis because he needs to heal a breach between himself and the Spartans, his nominal allies in what had become a joint war against Athenian imperialism. Among the many reasons for this breach is the fact that the Spartans had been helping Greek cities in Asia Minor defect from Persian rule. The citizens of one in

particular, Andtandrus, sought help from the Spartans because one of Tissaphernes' lieutenants slaughtered the leading men of their neighbours, the Delians, and he did so under the thinnest of pretexts. Naturally, the Antandrians feared that they might be next (VIII.107-09). The Delians, however, were not Persians but Greeks. They had moved to the Aeolic city of Attramytium because the Athenians had driven them from their homes in an earlier effort to purify (yet again) the holy island of Delos (V.1), the center of worship for Apollo. Tissaphernes thus sacrifices to Artemis to propitiate the goddess on behalf of his lieutenant's slaughter of the inhabitants of her twin brother's holy island.

As with "Artemis," this story about the Delians draws our attention to the beginning of the History, in this case to the archaeology wherein Thucydides charts the emergence and growth of Greek civilization out of a pre-Hellenic past whose "greatest achievement" belonged to Minos: he subdued the rampant practice of piracy in the Mediterranean by seizing for himself and his sons the Cycladic islands (of which Delos was one), expelling their inhabitants (at that time, the Carians of Asia Minor), colonizing them and "outlawing" any future piracy (I.4). It is by virtue of Minos' successes here that later generations could come to view piracy as a shameful thing (I.8; Burns 2010, 36). But by casting Minos as little more than the most powerful and successful pirate of his day, Thucydides also revises the mythopoetic account of the archaic past wherein divine justice governed the affairs of men. In its place, Thucydides intimates that men were governed by the force of internal necessities and thus lacked the moral freedom that would make divine justice intelligible. The concluding scene of his History would suggest that affairs in the Mediterranean are returning to this pre-Hellenic (i.e., barbaric) past. Not only are Greek powers upsetting the affairs of those from Asia Minor, with Athens reprising the role of Minos, but Tissaphernes, using a religious ceremony to advance his political career, subordinates piety to the political interests of his satrapy. The calculus of power recommends this move. At the end of the History, the compulsory considerations of self-interest, and not piety or divine justice, appear authoritative.

While Minos helps establish the peace and commerce that makes Greekness possible, neither he nor his rule are "Greek." What distinguishes Greekness from all other pre-Hellenic life (as well as its barbaric future), is a paradoxical love of victory. For the Greeks, as opposed to the barbarians, victory—in political life (I.6.4) or in Olympic contests (I.6.5)—is sought as confirmation of one's superior nature. Such natural superiority is revealed primarily through (what appears to be) the voluntary restraint of one's own power, a trait that Thucydides describes

as “measured” (*metria*). The Spartan political elite revealed their superior self-sufficiency to those they would rule by voluntarily adopting a style of dress worn by the poor. The Olympic wrestlers did so by competing nude. And the wealthy Athenians did so by discarding the adornments that honored their autochthonous gods (*tettigon*, I.6.3; see Hornblower 1991, 26-27), distancing themselves from such deities, their ties to their particular land that those gods represented and the neediness that both their gods and their land signified. On the basis of such openness to nature, and thus to the truth, the self-sufficient life-in-common that defines Greek politics becomes possible (Dobski 2007, 100-2; 2010, 143-47). But this also means that the core of Greek politics emerges from an unstable combination of the desire to display openly one’s radical freedom, such as one often finds in tyranny or imperial rule, with the need to devote one’s self freely to the law. This is a volatile mix whose darkest implication suggests that what we understand to be both injustice *and* justice originates from the same source, namely the concern to overcome our fundamental and enduring human neediness. That such a political antithesis should share a common origin resonates poetically with many of the dyads interwoven throughout the History, but none more so than the “twin” bookends discussed above. But it remains unclear how Thucydides understands the Greek openness to nature, at work in the desire to disclose one’s greatness for all with eyes to see, to cohere with its concomitant need to demonstrate such greatness through a public display of voluntary self-sacrifice.

Thucydides’ final framing chapters point to a possible, if puzzling, solution even as, or precisely because, they recall the opening of the History. Just before his conclusion about Greek affairs in Persia, Thucydides notes the emergence of the regime of The Five Thousand in Athens, praising it as the best government the Athenians had in his lifetime (VIII.97.2). This government was known for being “measured” (*metria*) in part because it effected in its form a judicious mix of the one, the few and the many. This remarkable, if short-lived, regime managed to accommodate the ambitions of Alcibiades and the need for the consent of both the oligarchs and democrats and it did so without either permitting the tyrannical excess of one or subjecting all its parts to the rule of a single principle. The “measured” quality that defined Greekness seems here to consist in effecting a balance of particular contending forces, one that recognizes their independent integrity within the entire community and thereby refrains from trying to impose a single dominant view on its multiple, discrete parts. But if this is true, then it seems the meaning of Greekness has changed; in contrast to those early, wealthy Athenians, the

parts that make up The Five Thousand do not attempt to display their complete freedom which, in their case, might come through the mastery of the city and its empire. And the balance that this regime effects between the parts of the community is, unlike the Spartan elite, *not* predicated on the belief that the voluntary sacrifice of one's power (i.e., agreeing to accept one's limited role within the new order) constitutes the means by which one part of the city can demonstrate its greatness and thus its claim to rule over the others. What happened to produce this change in Greekness?

Thucydides' Speech

We can begin to unravel Thucydides' approach to the "measure" of Greekness by understanding Thucydides' *logos* and how that *logos* is revealed through the political action of the History. Much ink has been spilled over Thucydides' programmatic statements about his handling of speeches and deeds (I.20-22) and justly so (Orwin 1989). Given the difficulty of this famous passage, we shall limit ourselves here merely to observing that Thucydides' statements effectively blur the distinctions between speeches and deeds, on the one hand, and between his concern with historical accuracy and his own view of what was necessary on the other, distinctions that he is so careful to draw and on which his explicit remarks here insist. If we assume that Thucydides is in control of his work, as he surely is, then we must resolve this apparent contradiction. One possibility suggests itself. By insisting on such distinctions, his explicit remarks compel us to question their integrity, thereby effectively blurring the differences between them. By doing so, he can point to the true character of such distinctions in a manner faithful to their absence while avoiding the very fallacy he seeks to correct. Such indirectness might prove unbelievable were it not for the argument, placed in the mouth of one of the work's most humane actors, showing the necessity of such deception (III.43).

Now the significance of such blurring comes into focus when we consider that Thucydides presents his historiographical principles in competition with the *logoi* of the poets, and in particular the poetry of Homer (I.10, 21). According to Thucydides' presentation in the archaeology, poets like Homer tend to magnify or adorn the truth. Later, Thucydides links Homer to the political psychology defining Greekness when he informs us that Homer sought victory in his own contests at Delos (III.104); like the Olympic wrestlers whose self-display follows the emergence of Greek politics, the blind poet wanted to display his superior

nature for all with eyes to see. Thucydides' artistry invites us to conclude that the public display of one's superior nature is a form of political overstatement. If Thucydides is to defeat Homeric poetry, then his treatment of speeches and deeds must not magnify or overstate the truth; he must not "speak" hyperbolically by trying to preserve or insist upon certain distinctions that might not otherwise exist.

In Book VIII we learn that the emergence of the measured Five Thousand is precipitated by a "re-founding" of the Athenian democracy at Samos (VIII.76). And this re-founding was set in motion by the murder of Hyperbolus (VIII.73-4), Thucydides' *only* reference to a prominent Athenian whose actions were otherwise well known to classical authors like Aristophanes (*Peace* 681, 690, 1319; *Acharnians* 846; *Knights* 1304, 1363; *Clouds* 551, 557, 623, 876, 1065; *Wasps* 1007; *Thesmophoriazusae* 840; *Frogs* 570) and Plutarch (*Nicias* 11, *Alcibiades* 10-15, *Aristides* 7). It is not altogether fanciful to think that Thucydides, by showing how The Five Thousand is made possible by the elimination of a kind of "political hyperbole," invites us to link his speech to the virtue of a community he praises most highly. Perhaps the greatness of Thucydides' speech, like the "measure" achieved by parts of The Five Thousand, is revealed by its refusal to claim to *deserve* victory on account of its voluntary self-restraint; perhaps Thucydides improves on the "Olympian" Homer because his handling of speeches and deeds reflects a restraint that conforms to the truth about the relationship between the two, one which preserves their interwoven partiality within the context supplied by the History and which can only be grasped through the prism of Thucydides' remarkable indirection. Of course, as it turns out even The Five Thousand cannot come into being without at least *some* hyperbole; Alcibiades' reintegration into Athenian politics, so critical to the success of this regime, is made possible partly by his own exaggerations to the Athenian naval forces at Samos (lit. *uperballon*, VIII.56.4, 81.2). If Thucydides' work is to be a "possession for all time" and not some fleeting political mirage, then his "measured" speech must surpass the virtue of even this regime.

Book VIII begins with the Athenians, struck by news of the disaster in Sicily, putting their affairs on a more moderate basis (VIII.1.3). But by the end of Book VIII Athens is under a measured regime (VIII.97). One of the critical steps along this path from moderate to measured is Athens's "voluntary" change from traditional democracy to the oligarchic rule of The Four Hundred. This change was effected by the dialectical exchanges of the oligarch Pisander (VIII.53); in his conversations with individual defenders of Athenian democracy, Pisander convinced his reluctant opponents, one by one, to set aside their hope that the war could yet be

won if they retained their cherished ancestral regime. Similarly, the Athenian ambassadors to Melos, through their conversation with the Melians, sought to cure their interlocutors of their hopes that the gods, the Spartans, or chance would help them avoid defeat and enslavement at the hands of the Athenians (V.85-113). And in an earlier (and much neglected) exchange between an Ambraciot herald and Athenian soldier (III.113), we see dialogue reveal the truth about an annihilation so extensive and so devastating that it surpasses belief, leading the wailing and panic-stricken herald to abandon the pious task on which he was sent. If Socrates is right that dialectic is like rubbing two sticks together (*Republic* 435a), then Thucydides reminds us that such “back and forth,” while illuminating, can also be politically destructive—especially when it arises naturally (II.76). Thucydides casually drops this “aside” in his account of the siege of Plataea. There his treatment of the daring Plataean escape makes it clear that the ability to find “the measure” (*ton metron*; III.20.4) is necessary if one hopes to be saved, even if it means that one cannot also save the community and many of its members. If we are to grasp in Thucydides’ speech his appreciation of “the measure,” one that can save us even if it means foregoing some of our most cherished beliefs and attachments, then we must read Thucydides’ History dialectically.

To this way of thinking then the History can be read as revealing Thucydides’ own education (Dobski 2010, 131-32), one learned at the feet of that violent teacher war (III.82). To access that education, we need to remain attentive to the structure of the work, a structure that, as much as its speeches and narrative, conveys an argument about the priority of politics to human wisdom. For the purposes of the present sketch, we can identify four major parts of that structure: Part One—Book II.1 to Book IV.133, or more specifically to V.17; Part Two—Book V.18 to V.113; Part Three—Book VI.1 to Book VII.87; Part Four—Book VIII. It is true that these divisions follow the major acts of the war and that they coincide with the “Books” that tradition gives us. But they also represent the steps of an argument, internal to the History, whose logic I hope to clarify. Needless to say, what follows can only constitute a sketch of the History’s structure, one whose contours I draw more sharply than the History would otherwise allow. Much that needs to be said will have to remain unspoken.

The Structure of the History: Part One

Thucydides opens Part One and Part Two by noting that his account of the war will follow natural or seasonal chronology (II.1, V.20.2). He does not follow the customs of his time by recording events according to who

held high office (i.e., archons) or who won high honors at the time of a particular event (i.e., Olympic victors). After all, people disagree about when a particular term of office began or ended and the celebration of religious festivals or athletic contests can be altered and even suspended entirely by human agreement (V.20.2). The change of seasons, however, occurs regularly and entirely independent of human agency. And yet in both passages Thucydides identifies the years in question by referring to archonships, Olympic games, religious festivals and priestess-ships (II.2, V.20.1). Thucydides' puzzling procedure here forces us to pose a question: is the proper source of human guidance a nature that is the same always and everywhere and knowable to the unaided human mind or are we to take our bearings from the political community, whose laws and customs vary from place to place and time to time? Throughout most of Part One, Thucydides approaches this question solely from the perspective of the political community. Framed largely by the career of the Argive priestess Chrysis (II.2-IV.133), Part One examines a conception of politics which understands itself to be an authoritative, self-sufficient whole, one to which all else, even religious custom, is subordinate; as such the regular movements of nature, of growth and decay, are irrelevant from the perspective of the law. It is perhaps fitting then that we find early in this Part Pericles' famous Funeral Oration (II.35-46), a speech which gives luminous expression to what political life can mean at its highest—the glorious path to individual human fulfillment through a deathless reputation unblemished by time and fortune. But of course, this is not all.

As even the casual reader of the History knows, Pericles' eulogy is followed immediately by the devastating plague at Athens (II.48-2.54). And throughout the braided narrative of Book II, we learn of Athenian alliances with the Macedonians and Odrysians (II.29, 80, 95-101), massive and mighty kingdoms both, each on the fringe of civilized life and barbaric existence (cf. also II.15.2 and 97.6-6). In this context, Pericles' golden words are like that partial solar eclipse recorded at II.28, one where the stars can be seen at day-time: against the darkened backdrop of barbarian constancy and the plague, the brilliant Periclean Athens shines, dimmed perhaps, but not obscured by the less impressive, if longer lasting, luminaries of Perdiccas and Sitalces. And yet, if part of what makes Greekness distinct is a devotional submission to the common good, then Thucydides' artistry here, which suggests a deeper link between Greeks and barbarians, leads us to wonder about the integrity of the element that defines Greek politics. From this perspective, the first section of Part One (II.2-III.85) examines the limits to a conception of politics rooted in divine

and ancestral authority. And this entire section is framed by the Theban assault on Plataea.

The initial Theban sally on the city is frustrated by Plataeans digging through the walls of their private homes to coordinate their resistance (II.3). By breaking down what separates them as particular individuals the Plataeans courageously secure what is common to them all (cf. I.93.2). Thucydides builds on this wonderfully rich image when he turns to the first Spartan invasion of Attica. Faced with this threat Pericles ordered those who lived in the countryside to move to the city and take shelter behind its walls. As they did so, these people carried in with them the doors, shutters and walls of their country homes (II.14). That the Athenians clung to what privately separated them even as they “united” (cf. II.16.2) proves disconcerting for a city that sought to place the good of the community over that of the individual. And yet, as the experience of the plague in Athens reveals, there is such a thing as being too close together (II.53 and II.16-17); perhaps distance between us—such as is provided by walls and doors—is necessary. To have a healthy city requires more than just strong walls protecting “us” from “them”; it requires striking a judicious balance between mixing together and separating its own various distinct parts.

It is the genius of Pericles, a man most capable in speech and deed, that he is able to “mix and separate” so effectively (I.139). For instance, Pericles is the only speaker in the entire History to deliver a speech that produced unanimity in his audience (I.140-144), getting his contentious citizens to agree on all of his points both general and particular (I.145). Later, when the Spartans ravaged the Attic countryside, Pericles sent the knights, simmering with rage and resentment behind the walls of Athens, on ships especially designed to carry horses to attack the Peloponnesian coast. By placing the land-force par excellence on water (II.56; cf. II.17, 23; for another approach entirely, see II.31) Pericles was able to defuse civic tensions. And this ability to join and separate parts of the city in various combinations for the common good highlights Thucydides’ otherwise obscure reference to the long-standing Athenian practice of using the city’s ancient fountain to consecrate marriages (II.15.5), unions critical to the successful foundation of a community. In both cases, we see that whether the “parts” are oligarchic and democratic or male and female, “water,” or motion, can be used to elide the distinctions between them, allowing one to create a union that also preserves particularity.

Of course, such unions can be fragile, especially when the moral and political categories binding them possess this same kind of mixed quality. Thucydides’ account of the origins of Greekness already anticipated some

of the difficulties with a conception of justice that tries to combine a radical love of freedom with devotional submission to the law. But these difficulties are given their fullest treatment in the Corcyrean civil war (III.69-85), whose report follows the pitiful surrender of Plataea to Sparta and Thebes (68, especially 68.3; cf. II.3,14 and I.93.2). The sharp clash of partisan interest in Corcyra punctures the image of a hermetically sealed political community, one defined by a shared conception of the just and the good. Driven by the compulsory power of the apparent good (III.82; 45), individuals are no longer able to articulate a vision of the common good robust enough to convince them to set aside their own self-interested pursuits. In Corcyra, peaceful and civilized life gives way to a complete or nearly-complete Hobbesian State of Nature, one in which the laws of the gods and of men are disregarded almost without shame. *Almost*. For while the conception of politics as a self-sufficient whole rooted in divine and ancestral authority might prove problematic, Thucydides prevents us from dismissing political life completely. After all, even as they tear each other apart, the Corcyreans do so in the name of or motivated by moral categories (III.82.8), albeit ones now distorted by the pressures of the civil war (Ahrensdorf 2000, 587-88). It seems that while one can bend the meaning of words, one cannot do the same to human nature. Perhaps then there is hope. Perhaps supremely talented individuals can look to nature as a standard for their conduct of political affairs. Perhaps nature can authorize laws whose weakness in the face of human passions suggested that their power rested on little more than convention.

Thucydides appears to take up this alternative from III.86 to V.17, where he presents the careers of two generals, Demosthenes, an Athenian, and Brasidas, *the* outstanding Spartan, two men who, in many ways, reflect opposed views of nature. It is true that both men possess truly outstanding natures, ones whose virtues owe virtually nothing to the cities they fight for. But Demosthenes approaches nature as a guide and thus a limiting factor; one that can be used, imitated and perhaps even improved upon, but not one that can be overcome and disregarded. Thus Demosthenes' initial failures in Aetolia (III.97-98) and his later successes at Olpae (III.108, 110-11), Idomene (III.112), Naupactus (III.102) and Pylos (IV.8-36) and even his later failure at Epipolae in Sicily (VII.43-45) can be understood against the backdrop of the earthquakes, tsunamis and volcanoes whose report introduces his story (III.87-89). Moreover, Demosthenes' successes here derive in no small part from attention to the proper mixing and separating of forces (see 107.4, contrast Ambraciots with the Mantineans at 108.3; 111.3-4). His victories thus recall Pericles' unique ability to take the measure of and balance the contending forces of

Athenian politics, one that Thucydides elsewhere suggests (II.102) is predicated on a mechanistic view of nature that rejects the possibility of providential gods who intervene in our affairs according to our understandings of justice.

For Brasidas, on the other hand, alone in Thrace with an army full of Helots, nature is *his* nature and not the principles of the material world through which he marches on the way to more conquests. His greatness is not the product of harnessing the physical world to fit his designs; the greatness of Brasidas' nature comes to sight in his sweeping disregard of any and all concerns with the Spartan rule of law. It is what allows him to break with his ally Perdiccas (IV.83), to procure deceitfully the revolt of Athenian subjects (IV.84, esp. 86.6-7, 88, 105) and to openly and clearly violate the truce signed by Sparta and Athens (IV.120-1, 123, 134). Like an earthquake at the time of an eclipse and new moon (IV.52), Brasidas' victorious march through Thrace exhibits an unbridled nature in motion with no cosmic light to give it its bearings or to check its flow.

In the end however, the alternatives represented by Demosthenes and Brasidas are inadequate from Thucydides' perspective. Demosthenes' attachment to a nature that is apparently indifferent to human affairs reflects a particularly Athenian turn of mind, one whose openness to nature represents the flip-side of a pious concern for what one might call "divine" or unchanging wholes. Like the Athenians at Delos, whose increasing efforts to liberate Apollo's holy island from all that generates and de-generates reflect a pious concern with unblemished wholes (I.8, II.8, III.104, V.1, VIII.10), Demosthenes appears to operate militarily on a view of nature whose mechanistic principles are unchanging (compare Nicias at Minoa, III.51 with Demosthenes at Leucas, III.94). It is true that his signature victory at Pylos derived from an appreciation of the nature of *that* particular place (IV.3.2; cf. IV.4.3 contra Strauss 1963, 159). But his strategy there was earned through the hard lessons of Aetolia, a strategy that he used first against the Ambraciots and parts of which he appears to re-create for a third time en route to Sicily (VII.26, 27 and 31; cf. IV.28, 30, 32 and III.97). Insofar as nature remains unchanging and intelligible to Demosthenes, and therefore something that humans can manage for their purposes, it is not entirely indifferent to human concerns. And when we view his career as a whole Demosthenes appears as a man who, at crucial moments, relies too much on trust (Orwin 1994, 122). He is too trusting of his fortune in Aetolia (III.97, 98.4), too trusting in the stability of nature in Sicily (and perhaps even at Pylos), and, for a man willing to contradict *two* generals before Pylos (IV.3), he is too trusting in the judgment of Nicias at

Syracuse (compare his judgment at VII.47.3 and 49.2-3 with his decision at 49.4; see also his “last words” at VII.78.1 and 77).

Brasidas, on the other hand, cannot represent an adequate solution to the problems of political life if only because he seems to seek to leave behind political life completely. In being crowned by the Scioneans as an Olympic champion (IV.121) and venerated by the Amphipolitans as the founder of their colony (V.11), Brasidas wins those glories and honors sought by aspiring tyrants (I.126) and which are reserved for only the most revered, an immortality that belongs to those able to transcend political life entirely. And yet, Brasidas can only win the open acknowledgment that he seeks for himself by a kind of noble suicide—an act of selfless service to the common good in pursuit of individual glory—in which he leaves behind the means that allowed him to demonstrate his greatness in the first place (Burns 2011, 520-21). There may be no greater illustration of the incoherence at the core of Greekness than the illustrious end of this most famous Spartan. It is particularly fitting that the transpolitical trajectory of Brasidas’ career emerges against a backdrop in which the inhabitants of Delos are expelled (V.1), Cleon is dispatched (V.10), Thucydides is exiled from Athens (V.26.5, IV.105) and Chrysis is on the run from Argos (IV.133). As the first ten years of the war come to an end, it seems that everyone is leaving politics.

The Structure of the History: Part Two

Part Two offers something of a backlash against the problems posed to regimes like Sparta by the natures of a community’s most impressive individuals. In this Part, beginning at V.18, one encounters the text of a series of treaties and alliances (V.18, 23, 47, 77, 79; see 36, 45, 50 for even more treaties and alliances that are attempted but never consummated and 31, 39, 32, and 41 for the details of alliances, an armistice, and a truce that are discussed, but not recorded verbatim). These documents represent the effort to concretize and thus stabilize the contending interests of parties jockeying for power. What Pericles managed to keep in motion domestically, these treaties try to stabilize “permanently” in the international realm. But all of these treaties and alliances, forged under the awning of the Peace of Nicias, fail; and they fail because they insist on the sharpness of distinctions that political and human life do not allow, aspiring to a fixity of particular interests and needs. Thus the absurd length of these treaties (50 and 100 years respectively) and their detailed stipulations on oaths, each more elaborate than the next (V.18.9, 23.4, 47.8-9), testify to an implicit gap between what justice always requires and what we think

our self-interest can at times demand (cf. Alcibiades' "treaty" at V.77). Of course, the failure of treaties here to secure their goals has more to do with the limitations of the kind of political speech they represent than it does the ever-shifting forces of politics. After all, the rule of Pericles and The Five Thousand (both of which earn Thucydides' genuine, if conditional, praise, II.65, VIII.97) respect the dynamics of a community's parts within a coherent political whole. At the end of Book V, Thucydides illustrates the limitations to political speech in the dialogue between Athenians and Melians, the substance and outcome of which bears on the status of justice among nations.

Contrary to the long-standing claim that the Athenians at Melos represent hard-headed realists, it is the Melians, not the Athenians, who introduce the "realist ethic"; they tell the Athenians it is not unreasonable for men in their position to tell lies if such lies will save them (V.88). But the Athenians reject the need to resort to deception to make their case and instead insist upon a rhetorical candor that runs contrary to their political objectives. It is in the very frankness of their famed Athenian thesis (that the strong rule where they can and the weak suffer what they must) that the Athenians reveal their moral concerns; they want the Melians to surrender to them on the grounds of their self-evident superiority. For them it is not so much that their "might" makes them "right" as it is that their being "right" makes them "mighty." But the Athenians fail to translate the sign of their superior strength into evidence of their superior goodness. Even more than that, the Athenians make the contradictory claim that their virtue makes them noble and is thus its own reward even as it is the means by which they are to earn rule over the Melians, a rule which in turn will signify their superior worthiness. Though they would correct the naïve hopefulness of the Melians, it is the hope of the Athenians for a world that recognizes and rewards their superior goodness, a hope no less naïve than that of the Melians, that needs correcting.

The Melian dialogue, by revealing the incoherence of the Athenians' efforts, suggests that any attempt by purely human means to disclose openly and candidly the link between superior moral goodness and superior power requires a less direct route, a less candid route, a less explicit route, one that cannot be captured in speeches and certainly not captured in treaties. For while gods might yet bestow blessings and curses upon human beings, they cannot be known to do so on the basis of the moral understanding moving the Athenians here and at the core of Greek politics. If we remain concerned with discovering an intelligible order to our moral and political lives, then we must be open to the possibility that the truth of about where we should look for those limits that may rightfully

guide us—nature or custom—cannot be openly or explicitly revealed to men.

This may explain why Thucydides notes at the beginning of Book VI that the poetic accounts of the ancient past in Sicily are irrelevant from his perspective (VI.2). If their claims of revelation cannot provide us with knowledge about what they reveal, then we cannot confirm or deny their stories about the monstrous Cyclopes and Lastrygonians, beings who lack origin, terminus and detailed particularity (VI.2). We therefore need not bother engaging these accounts. Thucydides thus draws a contrast here with his approach to the poets in Book I and this contrast, combined with his Sicilian archaeology, signals that he is going to start anew. In fact, in Part Three (Books VI and VII), Thucydides doesn't just set aside the poetic treatment of the gods. He also is remarkably silent about those non-human motions that cause so much suffering in the rest of the History (though see VI.70, VII.53 and 79). Thucydides' account of the Sicilian campaign focuses solely on human nature as it comes to sight through Athens' engagement with Syracuse.

The Structure of the History: Part Three

Syracuse represents the Athenian alternative to Athens (VII.55). Not only is her government democratic, but her citizens are innovative, deliberative, and daring. And yet they appear to combine these traits without the frenzied erotic longing to rule that plagues her Athenian counterparts. The purpose of reflecting on this engagement between the two cities thus seems twofold: first, to show the political consequences of an unrestrained *eros* and second, to see if it was possible for a community that otherwise resembled Athens to regulate the erotic impulse to pursue empire. Of the latter, Thucydides' narrative shows Syracuse's imperial restraint to be the product of circumstance—the absence of power and opportunity—not of a principled or lawful resistance to it. As for the former, the erotic love of liberty found in the private romantic pursuits of the Athenian tyrannicides (VI.53-59) becomes in Athens a tireless push for democratic freedom and the limitless pursuit of empire: first Syracuse, then Italy, then Carthage, then Egypt, then Sparta, at least if Alcibiades is to be believed (VI.90; VI.18). In her citizens the pursuit of empire becomes the limitless pursuit of gain, or comfort or security (VI.24.3). In seeking mastery over the entire Mediterranean Athens aspires to an unrivaled freedom from anything that might serve to limit her as a community or as individuals. One senses that her imperial trajectory, like

that of Brasidas earlier, finds its logical conclusion in the transcendence of political life altogether.

Athens at its peak, *Periclean Athens*, proved so successful because it largely managed to respect and preserve the political distinctions—and the tensions between them—from which the city's political energies derived. But in pursuing the conquest of all of Sicily, Athens sought to overcome or disregard any such distinctions as unnecessary limits on its own erotic ambitions. The results of such an effort prove disastrous. Thus we see the Athenians, in their daring night attack on the heights above Syracuse, fail to take Epipolae because the darkness of the night and the similarity of human forms made it impossible for them to distinguish friend from foe (VII.44-45). The Doric language spoken by both armies also made it possible for the Sicilians to steal the watchword of the attackers and for the paeans sung by both sides to strike terror into the hearts of the Athenians. While the Athenians share a common speech and “forms” with their enemies, it is the failure to denote particulars—those details that give to speech and forms their political and human relevance (cf. VI.2)—that results in a defeat, and in some cases the self-destruction, of the Athenian force.

The disaster at Epipolae was followed by others. In an effort to save themselves, the Athenians attempt to “break out” of the Great Harbor. Thucydides describes their crushing defeat here, one determined as much by the hoplites on the decks of the triremes as by the triremes themselves, as a land-battle at sea. The defeated Athenians were thus forced to retreat over land, with troops suffering from dysentery brought on by their having encamped near a marshland; that is, their bodies were degraded by flux brought on by something that wasn't quite water or land (VII.47). And while his men suffered from too much flux, Nicias, by contrast, suffered from an insufficiency of motion (kidney stones). It is this same “Nician problem” that was responsible for the devastating loss of the fortifications and materiel at Plemmyrium (VII.74 and 4).

In an earlier effort to extend their siege works, the Athenians tried to cross the marsh by laying down doors and planks; the same material they once used to define and distinguish families from each other they now use for a common purpose: to overcome a categorical obfuscation found in nature (VI.101). The tactic worked and paved the way for (what should have been) the successful investment of Syracuse. Though Athens ultimately fails in Sicily, Thucydides' artistry tempts us here with the intriguing possibility that certain, well-defined political forms are critical to those particular distinctions that make our world intelligible. But the Athenians rejected these distinctions in their self-interested drive for gain

and glory. It is perhaps fitting then that their final defeat in Sicily takes place at the Assinarus river where, Thucydides notes, their exhausted soldiers “fell in with no order” (VII.84.3) and in the ensuing chaos were butchered by their enemies; their selfish pursuits dissolve in an excess of motion that destroys both particularity and the wholes that particularity helps define.

None of this should come as a surprise. From the very beginning, the Sicilian campaign was predicated on an almost willful disregard of political distinctions. Thucydides tells us that the Athenians were ignorant of Sicily, of its size and its mixed Hellenic and barbarian population (VI.1.1; even its character as an *island*, VI.1.2), despite a long experience with the place (I.44.3, III.86.1, 90.2, 115.2, 115.5, IV.2 and IV.65). When the Athenians voted for the expedition to Sicily, our author quietly indicates that while “*eros* fell upon all alike” (VI.24.3) to set sail there was still a part of the city that silently objected (VI.24.4). Athens sees a unified whole where there is yet division. And this political blindness at home leads to strategic errors abroad. Thus, despite Nicias’ reminders that the Athenians will need cavalry to counter the Sicilian horse (VI.20.4, 21.1), the Athenians only take *thirty horses* with their initial forces (VI.43), a decision made all the more shocking by the fact that Alcibiades, one of the commanding generals here, depended on horses for his own Olympic victory (VI.16.1). Like the Athenians, Alcibiades thinks he is more self-sufficient than he is; had he reflected more deeply on the character of his own Olympic victory, he might have seen that Athenian success in Sicily would have required the knights, that part of the community almost certainly opposed to the expedition. And yet to have recognized this and to have incorporated the knights into the expedition would have required the Athenians to limit what they hoped to achieve in light of their essentially fractured character as a political community. While the disaster in Sicily provides them with a brutal reminder of their limitations, such an experience does not lead them to moderate their hopes in the kind of wholeness that political life can provide. Thucydides’ presentation of the end of the Athenian expedition to Sicily suggests that the Athenians’ simply substitute their grasp of a regular and predictable nature (VI.70) with a cosmos whose gods, at this point, must appear to them as arbitrary and hence inscrutable (VII.53, VII.79; cf. VII.77 and VII.86). Athenian confidence is replaced by Athenian despair.

The Structure of the History: Part Four

The destruction of the Athenian force in Sicily shows us the dangers to both politics and intelligibility of an erotic longing unrestrained by any limits, natural or divine. We thus leave this story impressed with the need for moral and intellectual limits. That need, combined with the History's critique of our ability to know and thus be guided by categorical wholes that exist in any pure or absolute sense, recommends to us a return to the kind of limits that one finds in Greek, and especially Athenian, political life. We make this return in Book VIII. Here Thucydides charts a course from a Spartan-like conception of moderation to a measured regime of The Five Thousand. In Sparta's three treaties with the Persians (VIII.17-18; 36-37; 58), in the oligarchic Four Hundred at Athens (67, 70), and in Thucydides' revealing comments about Sparta's slave population (40), we see the brutality of "moderation" at work; all of these represent forceful efforts to put an end to the clash between particular interests, needs, and conceptions of what is good, just and noble. But at the end of the History the rule of such "violence" is replaced by a measured regime that joins together contentious parts of the city without privileging one part over the others. While not produced by force, it is worth observing here that such a measured balance was based on an experience with extreme necessity and not, say, the more traditional (i.e., religious) sources of law and order.

Given that The Five Thousand proved remarkably unstable, devolving into full-blown democracy not long after it was established, it is unlikely that Thucydides presents it as an example for other communities to follow. And yet his praise of this regime suggests that we are to take seriously its chief virtue and the encounter with necessity of which it is the product. Such an encounter required the Athenians to see things as they are and not as they wished them to be. In this case, that meant that parts of the community, if only temporarily, had to suspend their claim to rule over others on account of their worth or deserving, on account of their willingness to accept their limited place in the new political order. This new, refined view of Greekness can endure only if one works through the contradictory character of justice, the concern for which fuels the Athenian hopes for a world in which their superior goodness will be recognized and rewarded. But to acknowledge and accept the necessity of such contradictions is also to accept that we cannot hope to know wholes, categories or forms apart from the adventitious particulars that make them humanly relevant. It is to accept that we cannot get beyond political life—the realm of contingency—if we hope to satisfy our concern to know "the clear truth" (I.20) about human affairs. And this means that our capacity to

know the world is conditioned by the very insight which occasioned such knowledge; the problematic character of Greekness provides us with both the means by which political life can be known for what it is and the character of that which is to be known.

By being incomplete, the final sentence of the History reflects these insights into our inability to know wholes. And with its final word it brings to a close the “twin frame” that opened the work, one possible interpretation of which is that reason (i.e., “Thucydides”) is itself a form of generation (i.e., “Artemis”). Or to put it differently, perhaps the kind of reason embodied in Greekness generates the intelligible conditions on the basis of which the world can be known and thus can *be* fully. This interpretive suggestion can only be raised here. But its possibility should invite us to think more deeply about the artistry at work in the History and the artful product in which it issues. Thucydides’ emphasis on Greekness and its fragility, a fragility reflected in its genesis and decay in the History’s opening and closing, do not lead him to despair of an enduring and intelligible order to human nature. It simply means that if we are to access this order and intelligibility, then we require particularly “Greek” manifestations of our humanity to come into existence. Human wisdom it seems requires the presence of a particular kind of politics, one which Thucydides experienced for himself and which he allows us to experience in the artfully structured pages of his History.

Works Cited

- Ahrens Dorf, Peter. 2000. “The Fear of Death and the Longing for Immortality: Hobbes and Thucydides on Human Nature and the Problem of Anarchy.” *American Political Science Review* 94, no. 3: 579-93.
- Burns, Timothy. 2010. “What War Discloses.” In *Recovering Reason: Essays in Honor of Thomas L. Pangle*, edited by Timothy Burns, 31-52. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- . 2011. “The Virtue of Thucydides’ Brasidas.” *The Journal of Politics* 73, no. 2: 508-23.
- Dobski, Bernard J. 2007. “Thucydides and the Soul of Victory: Olympic Politics in the Peloponnesian War.” In *Socrates: Reason or Unreason as the Foundation of European Identity*, edited by Ann Ward, 98-111. Newcastle, UK: Cambridge Scholars Press.
- . 2010. “Thucydides’ Philosophic Turn to Causes.” *Interpretation: A Journal of Political Philosophy* 37, no. 2 (winter): 123-55.

- Hobbes, Thomas. 1989. "Of the Life and History of Thucydides." In *The Peloponnesian War: The Complete Hobbes Translation*, edited by David Grene. 569-586. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Hornblower, Simon. 1991. *Thucydides*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Munn, Mark. 2000. *The School of History. Athens in the Age of Socrates*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Nietzsche, Friedrich. 1977. "Twilight of the Idols." In *The Portable Nietzsche*. Translated by Walter Kaufman. 463-563. New York: Penguin Books.
- Orwin, Clifford. 1989. "Thucydides' Contest: Thucydidean 'Methodology' in Context." *The Review of Politics* 51: 345-364
- . 1994. *The Humanity of Thucydides*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Rousseau, Jean-Jacques. 1979. *Emile, or On Education*. Translated by Allan Bloom. New York: Basic Books.
- Strauss, Leo. 1963. "On Thucydides' War of the Peloponnesians and Athenians." In *The City and Man*. 139-241. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.